

**WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:**

- 1        1. A method for verifying a product return, comprising:  
2              entering unique identifying information for the product for which return is  
3              sought;  
4              transmitting the unique identifying information to a general database for a  
5              determination of whether applicable return criteria are met for the product for  
6              which return authorization is sought;  
7              obtaining product information from the general database which indicates  
8              whether the product sought to be returned meets applicable return criteria; and  
9              accepting the product for return if the product information indicates that  
10          the product qualifies for return.
  
- 1        2. The method of claim 1, wherein the unique identifying information is  
2              entered by scanning a bar code on the product sought to be returned.
  
- 1        3. The method of claim 1, wherein the general database is located at a  
2              remote location, and the transmitting is accomplished by establishing electronic  
3              communication with the remote location.
  
- 1        4. The method of claim 3, wherein the remote location is a service  
2              provider which maintains the general database.
  
- 1        5. The method of claim 4, wherein the general database includes a  
2              product registration database containing information received on purchased  
3              products including at least date of purchase, and further wherein the general  
4              database includes the applicable return criteria for the purchased products.

1        6. The method of claim 1, wherein obtaining product information  
2 includes displaying the product information on a display at the location where  
3 the return is being sought.

1        7. The method of claim 1, wherein the product information includes  
2 options available to the person presenting the product for return based on the  
3 applicable return criteria.

1        8. A method for electronic validation of product returns prior to  
2 accepting the product for return, comprising:

3            obtaining unique identifying information from the product at a location at  
4 which the product is sought to be returned;

5            using the unique identifying information to access a product registration  
6 database and obtain product information on the product sought to be returned;

7            providing the product information to the location where the return is  
8 being sought for use in determining whether the return can be accepted as a valid  
9 return under applicable return criteria.

1        9. The method of claim 8, wherein the unique identifying information  
2 includes a universal product code and a product serial number.

1        10. The method of claim 8, wherein the product registration database  
2 includes information on purchased products collected at the time the products  
3 are purchased.

1        11. The method of claim 8, wherein the product information is displayed  
2 on a display screen at the location wherein the product is presented for return,

3 and the product information includes available options with respect to return and  
4 repair of the product sought to be returned.

1           12. An apparatus for validating product returns at a retailer's facility  
2 prior to accepting the product for return, comprising a local computing system  
3 having an associated data entry device and display device located at the retailer's  
4 facility, and being capable of communicating with a host system having access  
5 to a product registration database, the data entry device being operable to enter  
6 unique identifying information for the product for which return is sought, the  
7 local computing system operating in response to the unique identifying  
8 information to communicate the product identifying information to the host  
9 system and, thereafter, operating in response to product information received  
10 from host system to display the product information on the display for use in  
11 determining whether to accept the return.

1           13. The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the data entry device includes a  
2 scanner operable to read a product bar code providing at least one of a universal  
3 product code and a product serial number.

1           14. The apparatus of claim 13, wherein the data entry device further  
2 includes a keyboard for manual entry of the unique identifying information.

1           15. The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the local computing system  
2 communicates with the host system by way of an internet connection.

1           16. A method of reducing unauthorized consumer returns of purchased  
2 products, comprising:

3           (a) maintaining a product information database for purchased product,  
4       wherein the product information database includes return criteria for purchased  
5       products;

6           (b) providing unique product identification information to a host system  
7       having access to the product information database, wherein the unique product  
8       identification information uniquely identifies a product for which a return is  
9       sought;

10          (c) using the host system to access the product information database to  
11       determine a return criteria for the product based on the unique product  
12       identification information;

13          (d) determining whether the product qualifies for return based on the  
14       return criteria;

15          (e) transmitting to the location where the return is sought information  
16       indicating whether the product qualifies for return; and

17          (f) accepting the product for return if the transmitted information indicates  
18       that the product qualifies for return.

1           17. The method of claim 16, wherein the transmitted information is  
2       displayed on a display screen, and the transmitted information includes options  
3       available to the person seeking the return with respect to replacement and repair  
4       of the product sought to be returned.

1           18. The method of claim 15, wherein the location where the return is  
2       being sought is a retail location.

1           19. The method of claim 16, wherein maintaining a product registration  
2       database includes maintaining a local database which includes information on

3 products purchased from a particular retailer, and maintaining a general database  
4 including information on products purchased from a plurality of different  
5 retailers.

1        20. The method of claim 19, wherein using the host system to access the  
2 product registration database, includes first accessing the local database to  
3 search for the product information, and then accessing the general database if the  
4 local database does not include the product information.

5        21. The method of claim 16, wherein the step of providing unique  
product identification information is accomplished by establishing electronic  
communication between the retailer's facility and the host system.

6        22. The method of claim 21, wherein establishing the electronic  
communication is achieved by way of an internet connection.

7        23. A method of reducing improper consumer returns of purchased  
products of different types, comprising:

8              (a) maintaining a general product information database, wherein the  
9 general product information database includes product information indicating at  
least a date of purchase for each purchased product;

10          (b) defining a particular return criteria for each of the different types of  
products;

11          (c) transmitting unique product identification information from the location  
where the return is being sought to a host system having access to the general  
product database, wherein the unique product identification information  
uniquely identifies the product for which a return is sought;

12 (d) accessing the general product information database to determine the  
13 date of purchase for the product based on the unique product identification  
14 information;

15 (e) determining whether the product qualifies for return based on the date  
16 of purchase and the return criteria defined for the particular product type;

17. (f) transmitting to the location where the return is sought product

18 information which indicates whether the product qualifies for return; and

19 (g) accepting the product for return if the product information indicates that  
20 the product qualifies for return.

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24. The method of claim 23, wherein defining a particular return criteria for each of the different types of products includes providing manufacturers of the products with access to the host system for the purpose of defining and updating respective return criteria for the different types of products.

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17        25. The method of claim 23, wherein the applicable return criteria  
18 includes return criteria for the manufacturer who makes the product and the  
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20            3 retailer who sells the product, and further wherein the manufacturer and the  
21  
22            4 retailer are provided with access to the host system to define and update the  
23  
24            5 return criteria.

1        26. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of transmitting unique  
2 product identification information includes establishing electronic  
3 communication between the location where the return is presented and the host  
4 system.

1        27. The method of claim 26, wherein establishing the electronic  
2 communication is achieved by way of an internet connection.

1        28. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of transmitting product  
2 information is accomplished by establishing electronic communication between  
3 the host system and the location where the product is sought to be returned.

1        29. The method of claim 28, wherein establishing the electronic  
2 communication is achieved by way of an internet connection.

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1        30. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of defining a return  
2 criteria for each of the plurality of different types of products includes defining  
3 different return criteria for products manufactured by different manufacturers.

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1        31. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of defining a return  
2 criteria for each of the plurality of different types of products includes defining  
3 different return criteria for products sold by different retailers.

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1        32. The method of claim 23, wherein the product information includes at  
2 least a date of purchase, location of purchase and purchase payment information.

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1        33. The method of claim 32, wherein the product information is  
2 displayed on a display screen at the location where the return is sought.

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1        34. The method of claim 33, wherein product information further  
2 includes a listing of available options with respect to return, replacement and  
3 repair of the product sought to be returned.

1        35. The method of claim 34, wherein upon selection of one of the  
2 available options, the general product database is updated to reflect the option  
3 selected.

1        36. The method of claim 23, wherein the product information includes  
2 date of purchase, location of purchase, purchase payment information, available  
3 options regarding return, replacement and repair of the product based on  
4 applicable return criteria, and general product information.

1        37. The method of claim 36, wherein the general product information  
2 includes operating instructions, installation instructions, parts list, and repair  
3 information.

1        38. The method of claim 37, the product information is displayed on a  
2 display screen at the location where the product is presented for return.

1        39. A system for validating consumer returns of purchased products,  
2 comprising;

3              a first information processing system having a product registration  
4 database containing information on purchased products and return criteria for  
5 purchased products;

6              a second information processing system located at a retailer's facility  
7 operable to receive input on a purchased product sought to be returned and to  
8 transmit to the first information processing system a unique product identifier  
9 based on the input;

10             the first information processing system being operable to:  
11                receive the unique product identifier;

12           access the product registration database and determine whether the  
13   product qualifies for return based on the unique product identifier and the return  
14   criteria; and

15           transmit to the first information processing system product information  
16   which indicates whether the product qualifies for return.

1       40. The system of claim 39, wherein the second information processing  
2   system includes a display which is operable to display the product information  
3   once received from the first information processing system.

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1       41. The system of claim 39, wherein the first and second information  
2   processing systems are operable to establish a communication link therebetween  
3   by an internet connection.

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2       42. The system of claim 39, wherein the first information processing  
3   system is located at a location remote from said retailer's facility.

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2       43. The system of claim 39, wherein the second information processing  
3   system includes a product scanner operable to generate the input by scanning the  
3   product.

1       44. The system of claim 43, wherein the scanner is operable to read a  
2   product bar code indicating at least one of a universal product code and a  
3   product serial number.

1       45. The system of claim 40, wherein the product information includes at  
2   least a date of purchase, location of purchase and purchase payment information.

1        46. The system of claim 45, wherein product information further  
2 includes a listing of available options with respect to return, replacement and  
3 repair of the product sought to be returned.

1        47. The system of claim 46, wherein the display enables selection of one  
2 of the available options, and the second information processing system operates  
3 in response to the selection to transmit information to the first information  
4 processing system for updating of the product information.

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